Safe Routes to School
Caltrans District Interview Findings

Overview

In September and October of 2010, CCS Partnership conducted interviews with Caltrans District Local Assistance Engineers and Safe Routes to School Coordinators. The purpose was to gather information that would inform the California Safe Routes to School Technical Assistance Resource Center about technical assistance and training priorities from the district perspective. The survey design was reviewed and modified by the Dawn Foster, Caltrans Safe Routes to School State Coordinator.

Questions were provided in advance to those being interviewed. Responses were received from all 12 districts.

The table below summarizes the interview responses. It is followed by more detailed responses to the interview questions and a concluding section.

Table 1
Summary of Interview Responses

Reason for application rejection – Most commonly districts cited insufficient funds. Most districts received significantly more qualifying applications than they could fund. Several urban districts suggested that regional plans for addressing safe walking and biking be developed in order to prioritize grant awards to maximize the impact and address needs in a more systematic way.
Caltrans district staff – Most SRTS Coordinators are engineers with prior Caltrans experience and most have an interest in pedestrian and biking issues. Time spent on SRTS is concentrated in the application cycle periods.
Project monitoring – The responsibility for monitoring did not fall to most of those interviewed. Most perceived their role as managing the application and selection process and conducting a final review of the infrastructure projects. Most districts did not believe they had a role in monitoring the non-infrastructure grants. They felt ill prepared for the task and most believed it should be housed elsewhere – usually public health or public works departments were mentioned. Evaluation data from non-infrastructure grantees goes directly to the National Safe Routes to Schools Center and Caltrans districts do not receive the information.
Challenges in the application phase – Most of the challenges are for smaller agencies unfamiliar with the application process. These same agencies have few resources to devote to the application and find it cost prohibitive. There is also a need for including contingency funds to cover unexpected costs and a lack of clarity of what can be included in non-infrastructure grants.
Challenges in the review phase – Most districts use Caltrans internal staff for reviewing applications as it is difficult to recruit those outside the agency to participate.
Challenges in the billing phase – District staff finds it difficult to determine whether incentive items for non-infrastructure activities are appropriate. The requirement for competitive bidding slows non-infrastructure projects.

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Challenges in the authorization phase – Right-of-way issues can take years to solve, the E-76 approval takes 6 weeks to process, changes in staff at agencies cause discontinuity and require district staff to answer the same questions several times, and non-infrastructure projects have to comply with infrastructure requirements and cause some to give up on carrying out the project.
Challenges in the billing phase – Knowing what to approve for non-infrastructure incentives and the requirement that NI projects use competitive bidding slows the process and confuses district staff.
Changing behavior – No amount of engineering can address the fear of child predators which is a major factor in parents not allowing children to walk or bike to school.
Non-infrastructure – Most did not see non-infrastructure grants as part of their responsibility nor did they feel adequately prepared to select or monitor them.
Planning – Most did not believe a separate planning grant was appropriate. There are already more projects than can be funded and there would need to be a separate source of funding for this phase.
Engaging low-income communities – Most did not consider low income as a factor in application selection. If instructed to use this as criteria, they would do so if they received training in how to determine what standard to use. Two districts used low income as a tie breaker for equally competitive applications.
District training needs – Half of those interviewed had attended either a Caltrans training or a National Safe Routes to Schools training. Eleven of the 12 districts indicated that they would need training if they are assigned responsibility for the non-infrastructure projects. Two districts asked for assistance in recruiting stakeholders outside of Caltrans as applicant reviewers
Applicant training needs – Most districts said applicants need training in how to prepare and applications with this being especially true for small localities and school districts.
Training Modalities – Two modalities were suggested: 1) a series of short online videos covering specific topics and 2) a workshop in each of the 12 districts to which both district staff and applicants are invited and trained together.
Suggestions for change – Several specific suggestions for changes to the application process emerged including: a single call for proposals for both state and federal funds, a simplified application, modifying the non-infrastructure application. There was also a suggestion to create an introductory packet to be given to successful applicants that includes clear guidelines and milestones. Some suggested changes in allocation to allow funds to carryover to the next cycle and to provide a 5% statewide reserve of funds to be allocated to priority projects that were not funded because of the funding cap.

INQUIRY
This section provides more detailed responses to the interview questions. It is followed by a concluding section.

Q1. REASON FOR APPLICATION REJECTION   *In reviewing Cycle 9 SR2S applications, what do you think was the primary reason for applicants to not be selected by the District Review Committees*? (pick one)

1) *Most of the applications were all very competitive, but there just isn't enough funding*
2) *Only the best projects were selected. Unselected projects did not appear to have the same level of benefits.*
3) *Not enough planning prior to submittal of the application*
4) *The application was poorly written and didn't convey the need and purpose clearly*

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Eleven of the twelve districts selected response 1. One selected response 4. This led to further discussion.

- Nearly all districts expressed frustration that they receive qualified promising applications that they could not fund. They reported acceptance rates as low as 12%.
- Several districts indicated they would prefer fewer, well-written applications and the ability to fund a greater percentage. Some applying agencies/counties have figured out the advantage of reducing the number of applications and demonstrating their priorities.
- Several districts suggested that safe routes grants need to be aligned and developed within a regional bike and pedestrian plan, so that prioritization would occur regionally. They would like to see critical safety project proposed in phases and demonstrate complementary investments, such as inclusion in local prioritized infrastructure project lists.
- It takes a lot of resources to assemble an application.
  - Applications written by paid grant-writers may not be selected to send to headquarters.
  - Districts receive distressed calls from strapped cities that have submitted excellent applications that were not selected and the cities are trying to figure out how to pay the grant writer.
  - One district reported that the application process requires applicants to pay for a warrant, which several of their applicants could not get authorization from their fiscally strapped agencies to purchase.
- Headquarters tells the region what caps will be. Some applicants are submitting projects above the cap and the district is encouraging them to phase in their projects. Several regions expressed satisfaction with lower cap and appreciated the ability to fund more communities. One rural region expressed frustration that for the efforts of, writing the grant and meeting federal regulations, and administering the grant the lower cap ends up with less infrastructure completed. The higher cap allows for more infrastructure completion for the same amount of investment in administrative and application preparation expense.
- Several districts say they look for applications that demonstrate upfront planning and significant community support. They look for parental and school administration involvement as indicators of support.

Q2. STAFFING resources and how it is done – *Please tell us a bit about how you came to your role as Safe Routes to School Coordinator and DLEA? How does Safe Routes to School fit with your other job assignments?* (What percent of your time is dedicated to SRTS?)

- SRTS Coordinators expressed either an existing or a newly developed personal interest in pedestrian and bicycle issue. Most are engineers with prior experience within Caltrans.
- Time spent on safe routes to school is concentrated in the application cycle.
- Districts vary in their promotion and review processes.   Most have email lists to announce application cycles to city and county public works engineers. Promotion to other potential applicants (school districts) varies.
- The review team also varies. In one district, the SRTS coordinator was the sole reviewer. Most district's utilize district staff as reviewers. Three districts had reviewers outside of the Caltrans. Several mentioned that they would like ideas on how to efficiently recruit, train, and utilize outside reviewers.

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- Grantees are experiencing a lot of turnover and project reassignment.   Several reported receiving increased numbers of calls from newly assigned staff that were confused about steps in the application, authorization, or billing processes.

Q3. PROJECT MONITORING - *How many SRTS projects have you had and how many are you currently monitoring?*

- Most districts reported that they are not assigned the task to monitor projects. They are responsible for application review and invoice approval. In some larger districts, local engineers are assigned the monitoring task. Safe Routes to School is a very small part of their overall local assistance assignments.
- Several Districts reported that they mail guidelines to accepted applicants.
- All respond to inquiries from the field.
- Submitted invoices are paid based on evidence of following the proposals plan. Some districts expressed bewilderment regarding some of the expense items for non-infrastructure projects such as student incentives.
- On-the-ground infrastructure monitoring is assigned to engineers who do a final inspection of infrastructure
- Non-infrastructure grantees send their evaluation reporting directly to National Safe Routes to Schools Center. The districts do not see them.
- Several districts expressed that they are engineers trained to "build things." They expressed minimal understanding of how to monitor or support non-infrastructure projects with implementation challenges.
- Interviewers were repeatedly told that it is not the responsibility of districts to monitor non-infrastructure projects. Districts remarked that these do not have clear measures of success.
- Two districts suggested that county public health departments may be in a better position to monitor non-infrastructure grants.
- Districts said that headquarters offers information for grantees on achievement milestones which a grantee must achieve to be authorized for payment. Headquarters also provides a 40-hour training on federal grant programs. No one could direct us to a single source of the most recent and complete guidelines or milestones.

Q 4 *SUCCESSES – What have been the most successful projects that you can think of in your region? What do you think contributed most to that success? May we get a copy of their application so we can include them in the vignettes? Is there someone involved in the project that we can contact?*

- This question was often answered with the question "How do you measure success?" We heard various criteria for success:
    - Degree of community involvement
    - Evidence in annual report that funded agencies did what they proposed
    - Reduction of pedestrian accidents
    - "Any time a project is funded in a rural area then that's a huge success."
    - Completion of project
    - Success will be when school curriculums and infrastructure embraces the concepts of walking and biking to school.
- When asked if success was measured by increased frequency of walking and biking

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- o Districts did not have knowledge of which projects have most impacted walking and biking frequency
  - o District do not receive evaluation data
- The exception was Chula Vista whose project leaders: met with district staff before the grant was submitted; kept them informed throughout the project; included updates from their community stakeholder group; reported ongoing engagement with local law enforcement; and shared their evaluation findings.

Q5 CHALLENGES – *What challenges do you see at the site level? What challenges do you experience monitoring these programs? Have you found any good solutions you would like to share with others?*

APPLICATION PHASE
- Applying agencies unfamiliar with federal process (this was basically all agencies besides a county or city public works agency) find application very hard to complete. Applicants call districts with many questions.
- Smaller applying agencies often don't have the resources to submit a successful application. They are challenged by warrants and other application requirements and expenses.
- Some applicants have not invested the advance time to plan with multiple partners and have not gained the buy-in of the community where the projects will take place.
- Clearer criteria for what is appropriate to include in non-infrastructure projects selection would be helpful so that the money is well spent. This affects applications, project selection and invoice payment.
- Communities often propose projects on a project-by-project basis rather than a prioritized community-wide plan. This can generate too many applications; does not indicate the region's top priorities, and does not include phased in implementation or demonstrate other local investments in the project.
- Several districts get complaints from cities that hired grant writers but were not selected
- Not enough funding to fund all the quality proposals.
- Funded project are sometimes challenged in accurate scoping and unanticipated costs. Costs are higher than estimates. One district recommended that plans include contingency and multi-phase approaches.

REVIEW PHASE
- Some districts reported challenge of recruiting and training review committees
- Most districts use internal Caltrans staff for their review committees

AUTHORIZATION
- Right of way issues can take several years to resolve. Until they are resolved, the project does not advance.
- E76 is 6 weeks process once it gets to Caltrans.
- Funded agencies are losing staff to oversee projects. Turnover of funded agency personnel has increased with reduced local government budgets. Projects do not have continuity of leadership. This leads to repeated calls with similar questions.
- Districts close schools where projects are planned. "We're the last to know."

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- There is a lack of a framework to incorporate SRTS into overall community development. Should be linked to a master plan.
- Applying agencies have to have the will to do the project.
- Non-infrastructure projects should not have to comply with infrastructure requirements (e.g. FTIP, PEDS, EIR, DBE, competitive contracting). The grantees don't understand why they have to do it. Some applicants find the process so challenging that they give up.
- Challenge to complete in 4-5 years because of startup hurdles.
- "Small grants are not worth federalizing." One district recommends not pursing SRTS for small agencies.
- "You waste a tree every time you do a project because there is so much paperwork" which is fraught with risk for failure. "My staff holds their hand, it is time intensive, the ones that succeed either figure it out on their own or hire a consultant."
- Non infrastructure project have to tolerate "nonsensical paperwork" (right of ways, EIR, PITH, etc). They need different procedures.

BILLING
- Requirement for competitive bidding prior to force account has slowed non-infrastructure projects. "We are a road building agency. Non-infrastructure grants do not fit our paradigm."
- Non-infrastructure bills for unusual items such a t-shirts or key chains. If items are not mentioned in proposal, districts are not certain if they should be approved.

CHANGING BEHAVIORS
- Engineering cannot address fear of predators. Single incidents can set back years of work. Is this addressed through more education or more monitoring of walking and biking corridors?
- Schools need funds to maintain their walking and biking programs beyond the term of the grant.

Q7 NON-INFRASTRUCTURE – *How have the non-infrastructure projects been working? Which are most successful? What contributes most to their success? How do you gauge success? Do you have a system to access their evaluation data?*
- "We build things. To be honest, we have not done any follow-up. It is not in our scope. Non-infrastructure is a small part of the money we monitor."
- See questions above.

Q8 PLANNING - *Do you think a structure that provided a planning period and resources for non-infrastructure grants would be helpful, and how should that look?*
This question got mixed response and raised additional questions.
- Would a planning grant draw from infrastructure and non-infrastructure funds or receive new funding? Several districts indicated qualified support *if it came with new money,* noting demand for implementation funds exceeds available resources already.
- Several districts serving rural communities noted that it's the smaller cities and schools that are most challenged by the planning process. These agencies would find planning grants tremendously helpful.
- At what level would planning resources be made available? Regional or county-wide? Or would every school district hire a grant writer? "We don't need more good applications. We need a few excellent well integrated and prioritized applications."
- Would the planning include cost/benefit analysis? How many dollars help how many walkers?

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Q9 LOW INCOME - *Does your district utilize any strategies to ensure low-income schools and communities are considered/engaged in the process?*

- District staff noted that percent of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch is a proxy measure of low-income and is included on the application.
- While it is on the application, it is not currently given weight in the scoring rubric. If headquarters directed them, they could give it weight.
- There was no standard for what percent would be considered low-income. Opinions varied as to what was high poverty.
- Two districts reported giving priority to proposals serving low-income schools as a tie-breaker between qualifying applications.
- One district works with an environmental justice advocate and at her invitation travels to high-poverty communities to explain the program.
- Another district has a very engaged county public health department which focuses much of its non-infrastructure efforts in low income communities.

Q10 TRAINING NEEDS – *Are there any other areas regarding SRTS that you or your staff would like more information about? Have you or your staff been involved in prior training on SRTS? If so, who provided the training? Was it helpful? What are your training needs at the district level? At the site level?*

Mentioned Existing Districts Training Opportunities

- Two districts reported attendance at a National Safe Routes to School one-day training on the 5E's , including what qualifies and strategies for monitoring and evaluation. This was tremendously useful.
- Three districts mentioned the UC Berkeley Technological Transfer program. One sends staff to the biannual course Federal Aid Series. This provides a good overview of federal aid programs. Staff wondered if they could accommodate a half day session on SRTS. Another reported that the bicycle transportation program was quite interesting.
- Several indicated that they are self trained and have learned on the job.
- One district participated in Local Government Commission Walk Audit with Paul Zycofksy. "Experience around school campuses is very helpful."

District Training Needs

- Staff from 11 of the 12 districts noted that if they are assigned the job to review non-infrastructure projects, they need to understand what a good project should include. What qualifies? What is a good proposal? What is appropriate to bill? They want to feel qualified to monitor and respond to inquiries from the field.
  - "We're used to building stuff. We understand invoices for concrete and steel. When we get bills which include gift cards, paper and computers, I get someone in my office asking 'Do we pay for this?'"
  - "Non-infrastructure projects still have to meet federal requirements. It is not only if something is allowable or not allowable. When they order 1000 shirts, we are concerned who they bought it from and how much they paid for it. They have to follow the federal regulation caps. If we have a project for 500,000, is it reasonable to spend 50% on incentives?"
  - "They have to demonstrate a competitive process for all their invoiced items."

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- Two districts asked for assistance recruiting and overseeing a more inclusive application review panel that included stakeholders outside of Caltrans district staff.

Applicant Training Needs
- Most districts said that applicants need training on how to do an application, especially school districts. Others suggested that schools need to contact the city or county to help them, suggesting that the need for the right collaborative partners may be greater than more trainings.
- District 7 reported that they provide applicant trainings each cycle. "We feel that it is necessary for every cycle, due to application updates, and local agency staff turnover.
- "Agencies know there is money for non-infrastructure but don't know how to spend it."
- "Smaller agencies (cities) need training in how to apply. Many don't have complete documentation in their applications. Training needs to take place well in advance of the next cycle. Caltrans district staff and agencies could be trained together."
- One district suggested working with county public works to provide non-infrastructure training and strategic planning.

Training Modalities
- Short online videos on various topics would be helpful for both districts and applying agencies. (Topics such as writing successful applications; non-infrastructure qualifications; steps for authorization; invoicing procedures; etc.)
- Two districts would like to see a workshop in every Caltrans district with Caltrans staff and applicants, grantees all in same training.

Q11. SUGGESTIONS – *Do you have any other suggestions as to how SRTS can be structured to ensure the greatest possible success in its goals?*
The following list is a compilation of all suggestions.

Application
- Have single call for proposals and application process for both Federal SRTS and State SR2S funding. This would benefit applicants and reduce administration of the review process. Applying agencies often don't differentiate the two programs.
- Redesign application.
- Increase project delivery rates by selecting knowledgeable applicants with demonstrated commitment to program objectives and implementation
- Include interview process or opportunity for applicants to make presentations. "Two-way communication and visuals could clarify a lot of our readers' questions."
- Make application shorter. "Ask for more numbers and pictures and less narrative."
- Expand NI application narrative requirements narrative requirements to address:
  o How applicant will address the 5Es;
  o Measures of health impact,
  o The school district commitments and role in encouragement of behavior change of K-12 students;
  o Plans to assure continuity of project oversight throughout entire project;
  o Sustainability plan.
- Do not require Highway Patrol and Caltrans sign-off of NI application, rather seek demonstration of public health and public works endorsement.

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- One district provided very specific suggestions for modified the Evaluation Criteria section on pages 3-7 of the SR2S application with the comment, "In requesting response from specific agency(s), it will make the responses more meaningful and give the applicant(s) a better idea of what we are looking for in these applications. It also give us a better insight of the each agency's role and responsibility in project's lifecycle which will allow us to better estimate deliverability of these projects."
  - Questions 1 and 6, existing safety hazards and deliverability should come from either public works or public health.
  - Questions 2, 3, and 4 should come from public health. These address potential to reduce injuries, potential to encourage increased walking and biking, identification of current routes.
  - Question 5, collaborative support should include school district, public works, and public health.

Award Notification
- Create an introductory packet with simple clear consolidated definitive guidelines and milestones.

Allocation
- Provide ability of districts with small allocation to carry-over funds to next cycle so worthy higher cost projects can be funded.
- Reserve 5% of the statewide allocation to address priority projects that cannot be funded due to the funding limits of districts. This is especially important to smaller districts which receive smaller allocations.

Non Infrastructure
- SRTS has two objectives: reduce injury and fatality; increase walking and biking frequency. Caltrans is perfectly positioned for the former through infrastructure improvements. Public Health is understands outreach, community engagement and behavior change. They are better suited for addressing the second objective through non-infrastructure approaches.
- Simplify NI in every way possible.

Cross District Knowledge
- Share best practices across districts.
  - A rural district expressed frustration understanding the benefit of urban projects when rural safety needs are so looming.
  - An urban district expressed frustration in understanding why funds would not be allocated where they can affect the most children.

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Conclusion

There was strong alignment across the 12 Caltrans districts regarding their role in the SRTS grantmaking and oversight process. Their comments differed between infrastructure and non-infrastructure projects.

Caltrans staff felt confident about their ability to select and monitor the infrastructure projects. They identified applicant challenges, but did not express challenges in this area for themselves. The one exception was the frequently expressed concern that the funding does not reach far enough and many worthwhile projects go unfunded.

Non-infrastructure projects are a different matter. Caltrans staff did not believe they had responsibility to monitor non-infrastructure projects except for authorization and payment of reasonable expenses. They commonly expressed that they are engineers that understand how to build things. Several suggested that non-infrastructure is a public health function. If the responsibility is to be assigned to them, many said they would benefit from more training in this area.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

Consider ways to promote *regional* safe routes planning with phasing of projects. This may include participation from regional transportation planning agencies, county public works, county public health, or other existing health and transportation entities. Since no existing public agency currently has this mandate, greater exploration on possibilities would need to be explored.

Assist districts in recruiting and working with stakeholders outside of Caltrans for application review.

Continue working with Federal Highway Administration to make NI application and authorization simpler and reflect its purpose to change behaviors, not infrastructure.

Consider reassigning NI application review and monitoring to public health or provide more training for district staff on NI programming.

If NI is not reassigned, provide districts training and direction on review criteria, monitoring, and appropriate expenditures.

Reexamine NI monitoring and evaluation process. Consider who should be included in feedback loops to build knowledge about what works. If this responsibility is assigned to districts, they need a better understanding of project successes and challenges.

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